THE OVERLOOKED AMERICA:
How the Media Influences Us All

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ABSTRACT

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Historically, the public's relationship with media has fluctuated based on current events and how the media cover those events. The 2016 presidential election was a turning point for both American politics and media – Donald J. Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States of America. Many people were shocked by the election results, as most media were predicting a Clinton win. In the aftermath of the election, media took a hit – Trump claimed national media such as the New York Times and Washington Post were biased, and frequently used the term "fake news." Trust in mainstream media plummeted, and political conversations became more polarized than ever. One question emerged: what happened?

As I seek to answer this question, I focus on media's role in political conversation surrounding this presidential election as well as the perspective of those I am calling the "Overlooked America:" white, middle-class citizens in small rural areas who voted in force for Trump, finally making their voices heard. For my project, I focused on Trump supporters in Lockhart, Caldwell County, Texas, a rural town with a population of 13,901 just southeast of Austin. I spent months speaking with particularly avid Trump supporters about everything, from their stance on political issues such as immigration and healthcare to their media consumption habits. In addition to Trump supporters, I have spoken to mainstream media in Texas, including Texas Monthly and the Texas Tribune, as well as local media such as the Lockhart Post Register about media's role in politics, whether media is doing its job, media-public trust, and what they are doing now to address the bias impression.

I am a journalist. Right now, the future of journalism is in the hands of people like me – people who seek to find the truth and share it. Our mission is to inform the community, but to do so, we need people to trust us. And to gain their trust, we need to be listening to people – really listening. And not just to those who agree with us, but everyone.

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OVERLOOKED AMERICA

Adjacent to liberal Travis County, conservative Caldwell County begins where U.S. Route 183 meets rolling fields of green and brown, about 25 miles southeast of Austin. A small sign and a deluxe Pilot's Travel Center/McDonald's station mark the transition between county lines. The exit for Lockhart is only a few miles down the road. Signs for Black's BBQ, "Award winning and family owned, open 8 days a week" welcome visitors to town as the speed limit does, too, slowing from 85 to 35 mph.

A right turn onto Main Street and then another onto Center leads to Ron Miller and Jo Redmond's house, a white one-story plastered with Trump/Pence signs. No other political signs line the street.

In the beginning of election season, Miller stuck to yard signs as a way to announce his presidential candidate pick. But when neighbors started stealing every sign he hammered into the grass, Miller set a motion sensor to notify him when someone was on his property. If he heard the sensor beeping, he'd pull out his car keys and press the alarm button, setting off his car's lights and alarm, scaring the uninvited hooligans off his yard. Eventually, he bought a 3-by-8 foot "TRUMP/PENCE 2016" banner and tied it to the gable. No one has tried to steal that.

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America was rocked by the 2016 presidential race results. On Nov. 8, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump supporters alike stared in disbelief as red enveloped the great middle of America, pronouncing Trump the winner with a final Electoral College vote of 306-232.

Trump supporters celebrated. Clinton supporters cried.

In the aftermath of election night, Americans asked: what happened?

One hypothesis that stood out from the many others was that of rural voters – such as those in Caldwell – turned out to vote for Trump, the non-politician, in droves. Tired of the establishment, feeling overlooked by the government and unheard by the elite media that they see as biased, they simply wanted a chance to say their piece.

Caldwell, one of Texas's 254 counties, has been swinging toward the Republican Party slowly but surely since at least 1988. In presidential politics, Caldwell was staunchly Democratic from the end of Reconstruction until 1972 when the vote went to Richard Nixon. Though the county has evolved from a purely agriculture community, many residents still work on farms or ranches, buying and selling cattle at the weekly cattle auction, working in construction or running small local businesses.

According to the Texas State Historical Association, in the early 1980s, 83 percent of the land in the county was in farms and ranches and more than 80 percent of the county's agricultural receipts came from livestock and livestock products. By 2000, the majority of the workforce was engaged in manufacturing, retail trade, construction and public administration. Petroleum, agribusiness and varied manufacturing were the leaders of the county economy, and still make up a significant portion of the current economy.

The U.S. Census Bureau says today, 88.8 percent of the county's population is white; 15 percent have bachelor degrees or higher education; and the median household income is $47,233, slightly under the US median household income of $51,939. These demographics serve to further support the hypothesis that middle-class, white voters from rural areas, such as Caldwell, turned out to elect Trump president.

As a majority Republican county and a community of conservative values, many Caldwell county residents, including Miller, were excited to welcome the Trumps to the White

House. Lockhart, the county seat with a population of 13,901, bled red in this past election with 55.6 percent of citizens voting Republican.

The Republican Committee of Caldwell County holds executive meetings every first Thursday of the month at the local Department of Public Safety office. As a committee, its goal is to promote and support the platform of the Republican Party – "limited government, protection of innocent life, traditional family values and God-given freedom" as well as to work to get the vote out. They have a nacho booth at the Luling Watermelon Thump Festival, the Chisholm Trail Parade, Cinco de Mayo Festival, Martindale July 4th Parade and many other local community activities where they give out free copies of the Constitution and Republican Party Koozies.

Kathy Haigler, the committee chairperson, said she believes more people in the Caldwell community have conservative beliefs, but just by a slim majority. As chairperson, she works closely with the election administrator every two years in making sure the community is involved in politics and voting. She's noticed a pattern: most of the constituents in Caldwell vote Republican from president all the way down to county level, with a few incumbent exceptions such as U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett and state Sen. Judith Zaffirini.

"It's very unpredictable at the county level, but above county, we kind of know who's going to win everything before we do the returns on the ballots," Haigler said. "We're a community of strong conservative values, and most people vote Republican."

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Miller grew up on a 600-acre farm in Iowa City, Iowa, farming and herding cattle with his father. Today, at 79, he has close-cropped gray hair, a tanned face, and he still wears jeans and a solid or plaid button-down every day. He was a handyman in San Antonio before retiring four years ago. Now, he and his significant other Jo spend their free time at casinos – they just

returned from a week in Laughlin, Nevada, and soon they plan on visiting casinos in New Orleans. Between trips, they watch a lot of TV: Fox News is a staple.

Politically speaking, Miller has always considered himself an independent, though he had refused to vote in any election since 1964. At the time, he was a small-business owner – when he was called for jury duty, he felt he couldn't give up the time from his business, so when the time came to renew his voter registration, he refused. But on Tuesday, Nov. 8, 2016, Miller arrived at Lockhart's local polls and cast his first ballot in 53 years – Donald Trump had won his vote.

He remembers the moment he decided to support Trump. It was June 16, 2015, when Trump announced his campaign for president. Watching him speak on the TV screen, Miller found himself nodding along as Trump addressed the state of the country, claiming the Democrats had put the United States in a bad position during Obama's eight-year term and he'd be the "best jobs president God ever created."

"Sadly, the American dream is dead," Trump said in his speech, "but if I get elected, I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before. We will make America great again."

Miller believes in Trump. He never had any doubt he could pull off winning the election because, as he says, Trump is not a politician – he's something else altogether. He's a businessman, a celebrity, a Republican, an entertainer, a billionaire – an outsider. Where Clinton was the near-perfect candidate on paper, as an establishment politician with a sparkling resume, Trump spread a different message, one that resonated with the overlooked America, one that resonated with Miller. To him, Trump is understandable and relatable in a way other candidates from either party are not.

"I respect Trump as a businessman," Miller said. "Having owned my own business, I can relate to him."

Miller explained that, as a businessman, Trump's philosophy for getting things done is similar to his own: time is money. He wants to bring things in on time and under budget, just as a businessman would. Miller believes this has already made all the difference in the presidency.

"In my opinion, he's done more than most presidents at this point," he said.

With Trump constantly making headlines with social media during this election campaign, Miller created his own Twitter account to keep up to date with Trump's tweets. At first, he wasn't sure how he felt about Trump on social media. He recalls a time last August: Trump was doing well in the polls when, suddenly, he tweeted something unnecessary, causing a media circus for no good reason. Or at least, that's what Miller thought. Later, he realized it was a strategic move: with the media riled up and everyone watching and talking about Trump's left hand (the tweet), Trump himself was busy with getting things done with his right. That's when Miller finally came to a conclusion about Trump: just as a builder plans a house – complete with plot plan, prelim work, contractors and subcontractors – Trump plans his every move, every word, every tweet.

"The man knows exactly what he's doing," Miller said. "I have faith in him."

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There's a buzz Thursday afternoon inside the big white barn next to Lockhart's municipal airport. At the front desk, a man dressed in a light purple button down, faded blue jeans rolled at the cuffs, a blue baseball cap and boots with spurs asks for a number to participate in the day's cattle auction.

"Have you bought with us before?" the lady behind the desk asks.

"No ma'am," he replies.

"Okay, let's fill this out and get you official," she responds, handing him a form. "Who are you?"

"Blake Brosh."

"Where you from?" she asks.

"Between here and Bastrop."

"Brosh … are you by any chance related to Daryl Brosh?"

"No ma'am, not that I know of," he replies, laughing.

She takes the form from him and sends him through a set of wooden swinging doors through which a chorus of mooing drifts. Inside, two TV screens hang on either side of the stage at the front of the room. Local advertisements scroll lazily across the screen: Callahan's General Store; Capital Farm Credit – financing Texas Agriculture; Independent Cattlemen's Association Texas; Elwig Brothers Ag, LLC – fertilizers and seed; Long Range – "get more profit out of your pasture!"; Bio pregnancy check – "Keep your mind OPEN but not your COWS." The room is packed tight, full of middle-aged men in jeans or denim overalls, boots and hats greeting each other with a howdy as they sip their Dr Pepper and chew on toothpicks, chatting about politics or cows.

With his cowboy hat and horseshoe mustache, 54-year-old Hoppy Haden blends in with the weekly Lockhart Cattle Auction crowd. Haden is a rancher – he and his wife sell calves at the auction most weeks. He also owns a construction business and an environmental consulting business. Haden grew up in the Conroe area in a 300-person town called Plantersville. He attended Austin Community College and Texas Tech University for college, and after graduating, decided he wanted to move back to the country. He started looking in the Austin

area, found Lockhart, bought a ranch about 5 miles outside town, and has been there ever since. It's been 22 years.

As a cattle rancher and construction business owner, he identifies with the overlooked America demography – he feels disenfranchised and entirely unheard by his leaders, in particularly when it comes to topics such as health care and taxes. He and his wife pay for their own insurance. Last year, they watched their health insurance premiums go from $600 a month to almost $1,700 a month. That number is more than their mortgage, house insurance and ranch taxes combined.

"I think I speak for a lot people when I say we can't go on like this," Haden said. "Things have got to change."

If asked last year, prior to November, he'd have said Caldwell County was more Democratic than Republican. Now, there's a majority of Republicans on Commissioners Court and in the City Hall.

"This last election kind of changed it, tilted it," he said. "It's a little more red now."

Haden does not identify as either a Democrat or a Republican. As he likes to joke, he's a little too conservative to be a good Democrat and a little too liberal to be a good Republican. If there were a viable third party, he'd be in it. For him, his concern is less about political identity than lack of action on his government's part, both at a local and national level.

"It's just stagnant," he said. "It's not even that they're doing anything bad – it's that they're not doing anything at all."

After spending years in Lockhart with a Commissioner's Court he felt wasn't doing much for the community, Haden was determined to do something about it. He came home one day,

frustrated yet again with the lack of action on the government's part, and told his wife he was running for county commissioner.

"I said to my wife, 'Look, I can do a better job than that,'" Haden said. "So I ran, and I won."

Today, Commissioner Court meetings last for up to four hours, as opposed to 45 minutes like they used to.

"All the stuff we're dealing with for hours today was there when the old folks were there; they just ignored it," Haden said. "Now, we're trying to actually get things done for people. They wanted a change, and they got it."

Haden said the local elections paralleled the national election, to some degree. Just as he felt overlooked by his local government, he thinks Americans in rural areas feel overlooked and ignored by the national government. For example, in his opinion, Obamacare was always unpopular – but with the majority of Congress under Democratic control, it was voted in anyway. In his mind, that was the beginning of what, too, eventually happened in this election: those in control failing to take into account how the others felt. In this case, the others were citizens in rural areas.

"People tend to think there's not a lot of folks out in the country," Haden said. "But there are a lot – there's a big open space between the East and West Coast, full of people that were frustrated."

In the end, Haden voted for Trump – but not because he wanted to. For him, Trump was the lesser of two evils. Along with his fellow ranchers and other Caldwell residents, Haden was completely disenchanted with the way the country was being run. With a Democratic president and Republican control of Capitol Hill for the last eight years there was little to no compromise –

and not much got done. For eight years, Haden and his neighbors sat around, watching their insurance and taxes go up. Yet the media and government were reporting the economy was in a good place.

"I don't know where they've been, but out here where we are, that's not the case," Haden said. "But then again, nobody paid any attention to us."

Nobody except Trump, that is. Haden believes Trump understood how people in rural America were feeling and was able to tap into that anger and frustration to get him elected.

So on Nov. 8, Haden cast his vote for Trump, even though he was not entirely happy to do so.

"I think we saw him as willing to stand up to Congress, and that's something we've wanted a long time," he said.

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At the Republican Party headquarters in the months preceding the national election, Haigler saw an influx of new people coming in, people they'd never seen before.

"They came out of the woodwork this year," Haigler said.

They wanted Trump buttons, Trump stickers, Trump hats. They kept saying how tired they were of it all: of politicians, politics and the government.

"They vote for someone because they say they'll do something, make a change," Haigler said. "And then they get elected and … nothing happens."

Haigler has always been a conservative – the 59-year-old describes herself as "hardcore Republican." Although originally a Florida senator and former Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio supporter, Haigler ended up supporting Trump in the election. The cover photo of

her Facebook page depicts six various Trump bobble heads, each wielding a “Trump for President” sign or wearing a “Make America Great Again” hat.

Haigler works in the Texas State Capitol for Republican State Rep. Dennis Paul – as chairperson for the Republican Committee of Caldwell County, she takes an active role in getting fellow conservatives in her community to engage politically. On Facebook, she often posts “Political Nerd alerts” such as “The House has been debating SB4 (Sanctuary Cities) since before 11 am Wednesday morning. It's 12:49 am Thursday and we're on Amendment #63. We've heard the Dems have hundreds of amendments ready. Almost all of them have failed. Want to watch the fun?”

Before Election Day, Haigler and her husband attended both the Republican National Convention and a Trump rally in Austin. Surprisingly, she had fun at the rallies: people were excited, nobody would sit down, they just jumped and hollered and screamed, barely allowing Trump more than a few sentences between more applause and hoots and hollers that lasted for minutes on end. Talking to people at the rally, Haigler realized that Trump had tapped a gold mine by listening to the disenfranchised citizens from rural areas – before, many of them felt isolated in their anger and frustration. But by becoming a kind of champion for that overlooked demographic, he gathered people who felt similarly and showed them they weren’t alone – and he promised to fight for them.

Like Miller and Haden, Haigler believes Trump is different – he’s no politician. That unique aspect could make all the difference in being heard for their community and other rural communities.

"Trump said exactly what we wanted to hear," Haigler said. "We're going to defund Planned Parenthood, we're going to change the tax system so you don't have to pay as much…it sounds like he's actually going to do something about these things. It's not just talk."

In his first few weeks, Haigler believes Trump has done more than any other president.

"He hasn't delivered on everything yet, but that's why it's a four-year term," she said.

By the time Nov. 8 rolled around, Haigler was quite content with her vote for president.

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The 2016 presidential election was a turning point for American media as well. When Trump was elected, many people, including most mainstream media, were shocked. Most media predicted a Clinton presidency and when the election results proved them wrong, media took a hit. According to Gallup's yearly poll, Americans' trust and confidence in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32 percent saying they have "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the media. This is down eight percentage points from last year.

American's trust in media has been waning for a while but this election may have spurred it further than ever before. Many Republican leaders and Trump supporters, such as Miller and Haigler, say Trump received only unfair or negative attention from the media while Clinton received positive coverage. Many also agree Republicans think less of the media due to Trump's criticisms of the press: he has claimed national media such as The New York Times and The Washington Post are biased and frequently uses the term "fake news" to refute any news coverage he finds unfavorable. A year ago, 32 percent of Republicans expressed trust in the media – today, that number has fallen to 14 percent. This is the lowest trust amongst Republicans for 20 years. ago, Democrats' and independents' trust in the media has declined only slightly,

with 51 percent of Democrats and 30 percent of independents expressing trust. Overall, trust in mainstream media has decreased as political conversations become more polarized than ever.

Miller, Haden and Haigler all agree: journalists today are not doing their jobs.

"I don't even know what to call them," Miller said. "But they sure aren't journalists."

To them, a journalist is someone who reports the facts with acknowledgment to both sides of the issue, without bias toward one side. In Miller's opinion, the journalists of today can't be considered true journalists because of a bias problem.

In his retirement, Miller consumes media all day long. Every day for the last year and a half, Miller has started his day by watching a taped episode of "Morning Joe," a three-hour, 5 a.m. MSNBC talk show hosted by former GOP representative and staunch Republican, Joe Scarborough. The show features interviews with top newsmakers and high-profile politicians. The political pundit also offers in-depth analysis of the day's biggest stories and frequently debates issues with cohost Mika Brzezinski, a loyal Democrat. Miller has been a loyal viewer for a year and a half, mainly to keep an idea of what the other side is talking about. He thinks it is crucial to understand where people on the opposing side of an issue are coming from and strives to inform himself as holistically as possible.

"If you listen strictly to Fox, you'll never hear some of the things they think are a problem, and by the same token, if you only watch MSNBC, you don't know what that other side is doing," he said. "I've tried to be balanced a little bit."

That's why even as an independent that voted Republican this election, he watches MSNBC. He used to watch CNN too; now though, he refuses to turn it on. He doesn't trust mainstream media – CNN in particular. He finds all the political coverage to be completely biased against Trump and the Republicans – all they do, he said, is bring up all the adverse things

done by the party over and over, to the point of *ad nauseam*. He doesn't feel that they ever try to see the other side of things, which he finds both immoral and disrespectful.

"I like Trump, and I hate to see people tearing him down," he said. "When they knock him down and kick him in the balls and just keep on pounding and pounding … it irritates me."

Haden and Haigler feel similarly about media today – they believe nearly all media are biased. Like Miller, they agree that journalists should report fact, not opinion, and in today's society, it's becoming ever more difficult to separate the fake news from the real.

"It's pretty obviously biased," Haden said. "I think with media today, you can just hear what you want to hear – if I want to hear a conservative message, I'll go watch Fox. If I want to hear a liberal message, I'll go watch CNN. If you watch both, like I do, about the same topic, it's like, are we really talking about the same thing? Because what both stations are talking about is completely different. I think that's an injustice, to have conservative and liberal media. They should just report facts."

Haden is determined to form his own opinions about the news. In addition to watching Fox and CNN, he surfs the internet. He flips from foxnews.com to cnn.com to read the coverage of the same story, sifting through the mess and deciding how he feels about the issue.

"I take everything I read with a grain of salt," Haden said. "I wish media wouldn't tell me how I'm supposed to feel. I wish they'd just give me the facts and let me decide how I feel."

Haigler feels not only does almost all media have a liberal or conservative slant, most media is biased against Trump himself.

"There's a lot of twisting what [Trump] really said, or not telling the whole story," Haigler said. "That's not really fair. You're doing half the quote, not the whole, or putting it into different context than it was meant in."

Social media is not a new tool for politicians. Many use Twitter and Facebook to speak directly to and connect with constituents they represent instead of through the media. Trump seems to have taken a special interest in using social media, namely Twitter. Some, like Miller, appreciate that Trump tweets often and with no remorse. Others, like Haigler and Haden, wish his tweets would be filtered.

"I think using social media is good," Haden said. "I'm 54 years old. I just made a Facebook and never even knew what a tweet was, but when I was running for county commissioner, I knew I needed a Facebook to connect with people. I just wish his message was less brash."

Haigler agrees that using social media was crucial for Trump in spreading his anti-media message – and she feels that definitely affected people, especially Republicans.

"When you hear someone say the grass is green, the sky is blue and it's a beautiful day, then somebody from the media reports criticizing the weather, then you start saying yeah, the media is crooked," Haigler said. "They don't report correctly. People saw so much of that during the campaign where something was so twisted, and heard the media is bad from Trump that they just lost trust in media."

Even before Trump, Haigler had feelings about media being biased – but they weren't as strong as they are now. She agrees Trump's anti-media message did influence her personal feelings about media to some extent.

"He got a lot of people on board with him, especially Republicans," she said.

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Miller is having a hard time finding good news sources: although he's recorded and watched "Morning Joe" for two years, just last week he came close to cancelling the recording.

"They're no longer a news source," he said. "They're more like a … I don't know. It's not news, it's a production – they're gonna make a production out of all this crap and adverse talk against Trump. It's not balanced."

Even with his most heavily relied upon channel, Fox he's beginning to have some doubts. He's almost to the point where he's going to quit listening to the news altogether.

"The way it's being handled these days, I'd probably be better off – live to 90 – if I quit watching the news," he said with a chuckle.

Without "Morning Joe" or Fox News or CNN, Miller is stuck flipping through channels. When nothing is of interest, he goes into the back room and browses internet sites. The screen of his desktop computer is covered in home page links – Free Republic, Daily Mail, American Thinker, Zero Hedge, Drudge Report, EU Times, Breitbart, World Net Daily and TruNews are his 10 most frequently visited sites, some of which, including WorldNet and Breitbart, are not trustworthy news sources.

"Need a summary of what the FakeNews media won't report on? Here's the TRUNEWS Daily Recap for [insert date here]," reads the home screen of TruNews; "Islam's 'manufactured refugee crisis' revealed – it's different from what the mainstream media will tell you," or "Big media use fresh ploy to stop Trump's border wall – after losing debate on illegal immigration, protecting national security," reads the home screen of WND; the main advertisement on Breitbart's home page reads, "Voter Opinion Poll: should Hillary still be indicted? VOTE NOW!"

Each of the main stories on these news sites' home pages included a headline touting anti-media messages: "Big media…use ploy…", "it's different from what…mainstream media will tell…". With Trump claiming the New York Times and Washington Post are biased as well

as news sites many people turn to for answers when they don't feel they can trust the mainstream media spreading additional anti-media messages, it seems reasonable that people such as Miller, Haden and Haigler would lose trust in media.

Though Miller, Haigler and Haden don't agree on the way Trump spreads his message, particularly in regards to his Twitter account and the brash tone he uses, they do agree his media message was spot on: media is biased, and that's not okay.

"Just give us the news," Haigler said. "Give it to us straight."

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Journalists today realize they are in a precarious position with public trust being at an all-time low. However, Evan Smith, CEO of the Texas Tribune, argues that media has been and is continuing to do its job: reporting facts and informing the public.

"The press is investigating conflict of interests, the press is chasing news, the press is doing deep dive reporting on subjects that are of the public interest," Smith said.

He does not feel media is biased, and he believes the low trust in media right now is not a reflection of the press not doing its job: it is despite the fact the press is doing its job.

"I think the administration understands the press doing its job is a threat as opposed to understanding the things we report on are the threat," Smith said. "And with fake news, this convenient answer to an inconvenient story – I think fake news has come to stand in for anything the person being written about doesn't like, agree with or simply wishes wasn't written. And that's how they're treating the media: as fake news."

Smith does acknowledge, however, that this election was significant for media as it showed news organizations have a tendency to listen to a small, select part of the market they cover or the constituents they serve.

"We don't necessarily hear from or seek out the voices of people who don't have a natural tendency to be in the conversation," Smith said.

So when an election like this one happens, where so many parts of the country – the Overlooked America – turns out to a degree the media didn't expect, Smith considers that a lesson to them to do an even better job of seeking the input from and voices of people everywhere.

"I don't actually believe we're solving a problem or correcting a mistake," Smith said. "We're acknowledging we would have better output if we had more diverse input, and that's something we're always trying to do."

The Tribune recently created a new position, the community reporter, whose task is threefold: to be an ambassador to the communities the Tribune seeks to cover, to support "crowd-powered" reporting across the newsroom and to create journalism in service of those communities. Alex Samuels's job is to ensure everyone in the community feels like they've been heard, not overlooked.

Kathi Bliss, the editor in chief of Lockhart's local weekly newspaper, the Post Register, has a different opinion. She does not think the media did a good job ensuring all populations were covered during the election – many were left unheard.

"I am quite frankly disappointed in my industry," Bliss said. "They have long since forgotten it is not the media's job to tell us what to think; it's our job to tell people what to think about. On both sides of the coin during this election, the media spent most of their time telling people what to think."

She thinks there is absolute merit to the idea that media is biased.

"I think they have their agenda and they write the narrative to meet that agenda," Bliss said. "I think both liberals and conservatives picked and chose facts to support their narrative rather than letting the narrative be dictated by the facts."

As editor of the Post Register, Bliss has the goal to simply state the facts. She assumes people are happy with the paper's coverage as she receives an average of three letters a week saying she's either too conservative or too liberal.

"I'd say if you judge it by my hate mail, we're pretty right down the middle of the road," she laughed.

Miller does not read the local newspaper. Haden does, mostly because he is often mentioned due to his county commissioner position, and wants to see what is being said about him. He thinks Bliss does a fine job reporting fact and keeps her opinions for the editorial section. Haigler, too, reads the newspaper – but she finds Bliss's reporting to be very opinionated, even when reporting on events happening in the community.

"You can always tell," Haigler said. "You can always tell how she stands on an issue, whether she's for or against digging that landfill, based on how she writes. It's fine for local stuff but when it gets to politics … you can always figure out which way they're flying."

Texas Monthly's R.G. Ratcliffe, a political reporter for over six years, is somewhere in the middle on the issue of media's role in this election. In his opinion, this was the election in which America lost its mind because no citizens wanted to pay attention to anything that undermined their beliefs.

"You could report negative stuff about the candidates, and no one paid attention to it," Ratcliffe said. "It was weird in that way; if you go back and do a Google search for Donald Trump and the word lie for 2015, you'll find a lot of instances where the media said he was

lying. But it got down the end of the election and the Democrats were screaming, 'Why didn't the media tell us he was lying???' And it's like – they did. They tried."

Ratcliffe feels the Democrats tried too hard to discredit the stories about Clinton and the email server, which he feels contributed to the undermining of the news media credibility.

"When the media was reporting about Trump, one of the reasons people didn't trust them was because Clinton's people had said don't trust the media over and over and over again," Ratcliffe said. "Both sides were doing it, not just Trump."

When it comes to media bias, Ratcliffe says sure, there's bias – when has there ever not been? Particularly when it comes to a presidential race, most of the media are based in either Washington D.C. or New York City. There have been studies showing people tend to vote like their neighbors, and both D.C. and New York are very Democratic.

"What you get in your mind is a liberal bias for those media," Ratcliffe explained. "I do think there was a lot of effort made to not go down that way [as biased]. Since the election, particularly because it was shocking, there has been sort of a backlash of maybe we didn't do a good enough job exposing him to the public – I would just call it reactionary vigor, not bias."

Natalie Stroud is an associate professor of communication studies and Assistant Director of Research at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life at the University of Texas at Austin. She is interested in how the media affect our political behaviors and attitudes and how our political behaviors and attitudes affect our media use.

"The research I have done suggests that people do gravitate toward media matching their political beliefs," Stroud said. "The evidence suggests that the relationship goes both ways – people who hold polarized political views use media matching their political leanings and those who use media matching their political leanings develop more polarized attitudes. These are not

the only factors affecting attitudes and media choice, which is why this spiral doesn't always get out of control."

She argues there are good things about partisan media and that those with partisan views need places to develop strong arguments and converse about their ideas. But she also thinks there are good things about media simply reporting fact, though in practice it might be more difficult to do so.

"Which facts do you report?" she asks. "Might that introduce some bias? And what counts as a fact? I think a diverse media environment that attracts diverse audiences is likely our best bet."

All four agree the press enjoys less trust and less confidence from the public than it has in recent years which is extremely unfortunate: the public needs the press now more than ever.

And the press needs the public now more than ever.

Media need to be listening to the public – and not just anyone, but everyone. The job of media is to inform, but to do so, they must have people's trust: they have to make Miller turn on that channel at night, make Haden click on that article online, make Haigler pick up that newspaper or magazine. And to gain that trust again, the media need to ensure everyone's voice is heard and no one feels overlooked.

"In general, I believe this is an important tenant of American democracy – the class of ideas is important because it leads people to refine their views and make better arguments," Stroud said. "This doesn't mean people have to adopt the views of the other side, but I endorse the view that partisans should have an appreciation for different viewpoints."

TREATISE

As a 21-year-old journalism and liberal arts student at the University of Texas in Austin, I found this past presidential election – the first presidential election I was allowed to vote in – particularly challenging.

It wasn't because I'd never voted in a presidential election before; it wasn't because I am a liberal living in a liberal bubble within a greater conservative state; it wasn't because I didn't particularly like either of the presidential nominees; it wasn't even that I am studying journalism and media were being slammed during the election season. The main reason I found this particular election so frustrating, challenging and intriguing is because of the extreme polarization of our political climate.

I grew up in a family that absolutely loved politics – we were always encouraged to speak our mind. Political debates, as long as they weren't too heated, were considered entertainment. I can't count the number of times I sat in my grandmother's house over the Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday, listening to my mom and uncles debate. They'd sit for hours, talking over each other in loud voices, faces red and hands gesturing wildly. Sometimes they'd disagree, but for the most part their political ideology seemed to align – they weren't even truly debating each other, they were simply talking politics. For a little while, it was amusing to watch. After the hour mark, I usually grew bored and moved on to more interesting things.

Last spring, I spent the semester living and studying in Barcelona, Spain. I was enrolled in a few courses at the local university, Pompeu Fabra – history, art, and two journalism classes. One of them was International Journalism. Current events were a huge topic of discussion in this course, and one of the major current events we followed throughout the semester together was the American presidential race. As the sole American in a group of thirty students –half of which

were locals from Barcelona and the other exchange students from all over the world – I was often called on to explain what was happening in the race and what it meant for American and the world.

It was fascinating: most of the students in my class were under the impression that all Americans loved Trump. At that point in the election race, he was being treated as a slightly more viable candidate, but still had not won the nomination for the Republican Party. During one class, our professor pulled up a map of Trump-labeled America – my classmates thought it was both hilarious and horrifying, which mirrored my feelings as well. I assured them I did not support Trump and that it wasn't likely he would become president because America would never be that absurd.

On Nov. 8, I sat on my couch starting in disbelief as the election night map slowly but surely turned red. I just kept thinking, "No, this can't be. It'll change soon." But it didn't. Trump won the presidency. My roommates, both government majors, sat on the floor where they'd thrown themselves earlier that evening as things starting going south and sobbed. When I opened my social media, my feed was flooded with politically and emotionally charged posts from friends and family, reacting to the election results. Some were ecstatic, some were distraught, some were angry. I didn't really know how to feel, so I went to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up and went to my class, Reporting Sports with Kevin Robbins. Kevin sat us down and addressing a room full of journalists, said we needed to talk. For the next hour, we discussed the implications of the election for media and what this would mean for our futures as journalists.

I began to realize the 2016 presidential election was not just a turning point for American politics – it was also a turning point for American media.

Media took a hit during this race: with Trump claiming national media such as the New York Times and Washington Post were biased and with this idea of "fake news," trust in media has plummeted to its lowest level in history: only 32 percent of Americans say they have a "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in media. We talked about the campaign season, how different it was in regards to media coverage and why there was such little trust between the public and media. A number of students in my class voiced concerns that certain groups of people would suffer at the hands of the new president and government. One girl in particular shared how, as an African-American student, she was concerned what would happen with race relations now that Trump was president. She went on about the white, middle-class Americans in rural areas who voted for Trump and either weren't considering how voting him into the White House would affect people of color or simply didn't care. Her mother had once been the assistant district attorney in Caldwell County and had become a part of their community. My classmate was distraught that those people, friends of her mother, would vote for Trump.

After our class discussion, I was left wondering one question: what had happened in this shocking election and how was media involved?

At Thanksgiving time, I traveled to Louisiana with my family to see my grandparents. For the first time since I can remember, there was no political discussion or debate – in fact, we were told not to speak about the election if we could help it because we didn't want to offend anyone. Apparently, some of my family members had voted for Trump – both my parents and I had voted for Clinton, and they felt it would be better to avoid the subject altogether. I was slightly confused, though not entirely surprised: up until that election, politics had never been considered off-limits, especially with family. And we had never, ever worried about offending anyone before. But as I was beginning to see, this election was unlike any other – it wasn't just

an election between Clinton and Trump: for many people, it was an election between right and wrong, good and evil. Clinton supporters were so upset by the election results and Trump supporters so invigorated the two camps were unable to effectively communicate with one another about the election. The political atmosphere was polarized to an extreme. I didn't bring the election up over Thanksgiving – and neither did anyone else.

That was when I decided I needed to change my thesis topic (very late in the game, I might add). I wanted to further explore what had happened, investigate media's role in the election and try to better understand why the public's trust in media was so low.

Taking on a project dealing with a national election was a daunting task – so to make it more reasonable for my timeline, I decided to focus on a county in Texas, specifically one that had gone red for Trump in the election but not by too much. I was intrigued by the rural, middle-class, white voter theory that had been further discussed in media a while later after Election Day, so I approached my classmate and asked if I could get in touch with her mother. Her mother, Summer Benford, was happy to oblige and, though she herself no longer lived or worked in Caldwell, she was able to put me in touch with someone well-known and connected in the community to help me with my project: Arnold Alonzo.

I got in touch with Alonzo and explained a little bit about what I wanted: to speak with some people from Caldwell County about their political ideologies, media consumption and general lifestyle. Almost immediately, he asked me whether I had voted for Trump or Clinton in the election. I told him I had voted for Clinton. He told me he'd voted for Trump. There was a slight pause on the line, as if he were waiting for some kind of negative reaction from me – but I simply said I understood and that neither of the candidates was ideal. I explained that part of the reason I was interested in pursuing this topic was that I consider myself a Democrat, I voted for

Clinton, and I wanted to understand why people voted for Trump. I couldn't understand what kind of thought process someone must have to vote for a billionaire celebrity who was connected to a defrauded education company and accused of sexual assault and sexual harassment by at least 15 women in the past 30 years. I wasn't there to judge – I was there to listen and ask some questions. I wanted to learn, to understand.

Alonzo put me in touch with his next-door neighbor, Ron Miller. Although he considers himself an independent, he voted for Trump in the election and was a vocal supporter. I called him, introduced myself and explained what my project was about. He, too, asked who I'd voted for in the election. Once again, I said I'd voted for Clinton, but that the purpose of my project was to have a conversation with Trump supporters in rural areas to understand why they'd voted the way they did. He agreed to meet with me and invited me to his and his significant other Jo's house. The first time I drove up, I found the house because of the huge Trump/Pence signs plastered all over it. None of the other houses on his street displayed any political signs. I was slightly nervous to meet Miller, because I wasn't sure what to expect. But he was extremely kind and welcoming, as was Jo. They ushered me into the living room and we simply sat and talked a little about ourselves to get to know each other. We didn't discuss politics, just talked about our families, hobbies, lives, education and exchanged a few jokes. By the end of the hour, we were both talking more freely and comfortably with one another. As I stood up to leave after arranging a time for me to return with my recorder and questions, Miller said something to me that resonated with me for the duration of my project: "I've never in my 80 years of life been able to have a real political conversation with a Democrat and especially now, I don't think I ever will."

At the time, I didn't understand what he meant when he said that. But after spending five months speaking to him and many others from the Caldwell community, I realized he meant

exactly what I'd worried: as a Trump supporter, he felt those in the "other camp" – Clinton supporters – were not willing or able to have a civilized conversation about the election and politics in general. The same held true for Clinton supporters: they felt unable to speak about politics with Trump supporters.

I was struck by how sad this statement was. And how wrong it is that Americans can't sit down and have a conversation together about our government, when it's something that affects us all. Liberal or conservative, we need to be having conversations, to be listening to each other and sharing our thoughts as well, to better understand where the other person comes from. The rest of the times I went back to visit Miller, we sat in lawn chairs on his back porch or in his yard chatting. I did take my recorder and he knew I was interviewing him, but it was more of a conversation than an interview – which is exactly what I wanted. Our talks went for hours – we talked about why, after 53 years, he decided to vote for the first time, what about Donald Trump made him feel it was worth it. Miller read "The Art of the Deal" many times over and found Trump to be a brilliant businessman. When I asked him about the allegations that Trump's father made him who he is today, he immediately had a response: he said Trump's father didn't give him the money, he borrowed it from his father because he was fortunate enough to have a father to borrow from. He borrowed and started his business and instead of staying in that business he ventured out into another area, and then another – he was aggressive and successful because of his own hard work and ingenuity.

The first time I left Miller's house after speaking with him about Trump and general politics, I said goodbye, walked to my car and got in. I just sat there for a few moments and said, "Wow." I was slightly shocked that such a huge Trump supporter could come across as such an intelligent, compassionate person. I hadn't even realized until that moment that I was expecting

someone completely different – less intelligent, less compassionate, more conservative, less relatable. I realized that, just like so many friends and family members I know and love, I had been operating on a preconceived notion of a Trump supporter, which is not fair to Miller or any other Trump supporter. Just because he didn't have the same political ideology as me, just because we voted for different people, I was subconsciously assuming we would not be able to get along.

I don't mean to say that I agreed with everything Miller said to me during the five months we met and spoke – I still do not believe Barack Obama is a closet Muslim; I do not respect Trump's way of speaking about women; I still do not support the building of a wall between Mexico and the United States. But I have to admit, whenever I questioned his reasoning for thinking a certain way or believing a certain thing, a lot of what he had to say made sense. I've often found myself agreeing with people when they say Trump is a blundering idiot, a mere puppet who isn't capable of being in charge of his own Twitter account, much less the United States government. Yet, when I looked at Trump through Miller's life lens – that of a business owner – I found that his thought process did make a kind of sense. I often left our conversations questioning whether either of us was right about Trump – is he really a smart, calculating businessman who can actually deliver on his promises to Americans to lower taxes and build a wall, or is he really an unintelligent, racist and xenophobic celebrity who just likes to hear himself talk?

I'm not sure there's a right or wrong answer to that question – our perspectives are different based on life circumstances and experiences. My experiences as a young journalism student at UT raised in a Democratic family shape my view of the world and of politics, just as Miller's experiences as a conservative rancher's son from small-town Iowa shapes his.

I spent five months speaking to Miller and others from his community about everything, from their opinions about immigration and healthcare to their media consumption habits. We talked a lot about their opinions on media – none of them think media is doing its job. They think almost all media is biased: CNN is liberal, MSNBC is liberal, Fox is conservative, all media give opinions instead of facts. As part of the media, it's been really hard for me to listen, but also extremely important – I need to hear it. The media needs to hear it so that things can change.

Miller and Haigler and Haden and I may not agree on who would be most fit for the position of president or what media is biased, but we can agree on two things: one, that it's crucial for the public to have trust in the media; and, two, it's vital we can all reach out to one another and have civilized conversations with one another so we can try to understand why people who are different than us think or act the way they do. Throughout the mere five months I spent talking and listening to Miller and others in the Caldwell community, my ideas and beliefs about politics, the world and the people around me evolved. I'm not a Trump supporter and I likely never will be, but I can now honestly say I understand better why he was elected President of the United States.

The final visit I had with Miller, after I stopped the recorder for the last time, we sat in silence for a few moments, enjoying the breeze whistling through the backyard. He turned to me and thanked me for allowing him to be part of my project. He said he appreciated finally being heard. And then he said, "I still think most liberals would rather listen to themselves talk than listen to someone else, but you listened to me. You listened."

If nothing else, that makes this whole project worthwhile for me, that I was able to make some sort of difference for him and for Haden and Haigler and Alonzo. The simple act of listening and respecting their opinions was enough to give Miller just a little more hope.

I am a journalist. Right now, the future of journalism is in the hands of people like me. Our mission is to inform, but to so, we need people to trust us. And to gain that trust, we need to be listening to people – really listening. And not just to those who agree with us, but everyone, including those people like Miller and his neighbors. I hope that media will seek out those overlooked people and continue to do the best they can to inform the community. And I hope sometime soon, we will all feel comfortable once again trusting our media and having conversations with one another.

BIOGRAPHY

Virginia A. Scherer was born in Louisiana on August 10, 1995, and moved with her family to San Antonio, Texas before she was two months old. She majored in Journalism and Plan II Honors at the University of Texas at Austin and studied history, art, journalism and language at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain spring semester of her junior year. In college, she was a graphics designer for the Daily Texan, a member of Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society and Texas Bluebonnets Spirit Group, president of Longhorn Lights Out and an editorial intern for Texas Monthly. She will graduate in 2017 and plans to join the Peace Corps. She hopes to continue writing in the future.